

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L ALMATY 003453

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CACEN (MUDGE)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/03/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KZ](#) [POLITICAL](#)

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: OPPOSITION MEDIA UNDER PRESSURE IN
ADVANCE OF ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador John Ordway, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The risks of doing business with opposition media in the run-up to the December presidential elections became apparent when the Vremya Print majority owner cancelled printing contracts with several opposition newspapers, fearing reprisals against his business interests. The papers subsequently signed contracts with a different printer. The confiscation of opposition newspapers continued, and the procurator issued a special warning to Respublika, declaring all versions of the paper illegal and subject to seizure. The Presidential Administration claimed that the opposition press was engaged in illegal, premature election campaigning, but said they would hold back on any action. They also admitted that seizing newspapers, except Respublika, was a "mistake" that would not be repeated. Opposition editors will seek attention and support from the international community to embarrass the administration into easing the pressure. The warnings by the procuracy could be a worrisome signal that critical, independent media may suffer the consequences of their reporting in court. END SUMMARY.

Vremya Refuses Lucrative Orders from Opposition Papers

12. (SBU) On September 26 Vremya Print cancelled their contracts to print five opposition newspapers, without explanation (see reftels). At a press conference the next day, the papers' editors accused the authorities of pressuring the firm to refuse their orders, and said Vremya Print was a "victim" of political machinations. They staged a protest at the firm September 28, demanding an explanation for the refusal, and called on international observers to boycott the elections in December. The editors said they had been negotiating with the Aziya Press and Dauir printing houses, both of which belong to the Nazarbayev family, but they are "not optimistic" about the outcome. A day later, however, a contract was signed with the Dauir printing house, which post understands is owned by presidential sister-in-law Svetlana Nazarbayeva; the newspapers have continued to appear without interruption.

Ambassador Discusses Issue With Vremya, Pres Administration

13. (C) At a meeting with Ambassador Ordway September 28, Vremya's editor-in-chief Igor Meltzer and general director Boris Kapelman said the firm cancelled the print orders because their majority shareholder was worried about reprisals against his other business holdings. Although they did not identify him explicitly, it was clear that the shareholder was Kazkommertzbank Director Nurzhan Subhanberdin, who is affiliated with the Ak Zhol political party. In a separate conversation with emboff, Real Ak Zhol co-chairman and former Minister of Information Altynbek Sarsenbailuly (protect) claimed the pressure to cancel the contracts came from President Nazarbayev, who has for years been infuriated by the opposition media's criticisms of him and his administration. In yet another conversation, opposition presidential candidate Tuyakbay said that based on his understanding, Almaty akim Tasmagambetov had gone to the president with samples of the opposition press and asked how he could run Almaty as the president wished with these kinds of newspapers printing. He obtained presidential approval for putting pressure on Subhanberdin to pull the plug on printing the papers.

14. (C) When the Ambassador asked the Vremya team how the USG could help, Kapelman said simply agreeing to meet with them had already had an effect, since information about their planned meeting had apparently been acquired through a phone tap and passed through the chain of command. He said that at 3:10pm September 27 Vremya was on the phone planning the meeting with the Ambassador, and by 7:47pm the official newswire Kazinfo announced Aziya Press was negotiating to print the opposition papers. (Note: Western press reports September 29 confirmed that Aziya and the editors were negotiating.) Meltzer said 25% of the firm's printing business came from the opposition press, and he wanted that business back. He said public statements in support of independent media from "foreigners" would help, presumably

because such statements would focus international attention on the harassment of opposition media.

15. (C) Ambassador Ordway raised this case by phone with Assistant to the President Karim Masimov on September 26. The next day Masimov invited the Ambassador to a meeting with Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Baurzhan

Mukhamedzhanov, and the Ambassador reiterated the dire consequences of an election campaign with no opposition press. Mukhamedzhanov said that other printing houses were capable of printing the papers, and said that this was a purely commercial issue.

Police Seize More Papers During "Bomb Searches"

16. (SBU) On September 5 in Kostanay police seized opposition newspapers from the offices of the Alga opposition party. (Note : the latter started as a radical break-away movement from the now-banned Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan.) According to Alga's press service, the police entered without a warrant, said they were searching for a bomb, and seized all issues of Syet'.kz, Assandi Times, Soz, Lad, Zhuma Times-Data Nedeli, Nasha Gazeta, Epokha and Svoboda Slova. On September 23 local police in Pavlodar, once again claiming they were searching for a bomb, stopped a car making deliveries, and seized the "banned newspapers" Epokha and Data Nedeli. Svoboda Slova editor-in-chief Gul'zhan Yergaliev, said copies of her paper were regularly being confiscated from wholesale distributors, from trains that deliver copies to the regions, and from vendors.

17. (C) At the Ambassador's September 27 meeting, Mukhamedzhanov volunteered that the "raid" on Alga was a mistake, and that the Minister of Internal Affairs had been instructed to hold the overzealous enforcers accountable. He defended the confiscation of "banned" newspapers, i.e., Respublika and all its aliases, but added that the confiscation of Zhuma Times was a mistake and should not happen again.

More Bad News for Respublika From Court and Procurator

16. (SBU) On September 12, in the latest of a series of unfavorable rulings, the inter-district economic court of Almaty ruled that Respublika's attempts to transfer ownership from Bastau, Ltd. to New Pi Ar, Ltd. were invalid, and thus the paper had no legal right to publish. (Note: Respublika has tried a series of legal maneuvers and name changes to keep publishing. In May the information ministry ordered them to stop publishing and revoked their registration. Court rulings in March and May ordered them to stop publishing, and annulled their registration). The court also rejected Respublika's counter-suit, claiming official negligence on the part of the ministry for failing to re-register their Syet'.kz version.

17. (SBU) In a statement September 26, the procurator accused Respublika of repeatedly violating their registration by publishing under various names, and declared that any issues of Syet'.kz, Respublika, Pyatoye Izmereniye, or Assandi-Times would be confiscated. The statement mentioned that annulment of Syet'.kz's registration, and declared the six issues published under that name illegal.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: The opposition editors and Vremya management both agree that shining an international spotlight on the harassment of independent media could embarrass the administration into easing up the pressure. With more than two months before the elections, the warnings by the procuracy (ref B) could be a worrisome sign that media will suffer the consequences of critical reporting in court. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Minimize for Dushanbe considered.
ORDWAY

NNNN